

Health and executive privilege

Presidents throughout history have kept health problems secret; sometimes the presidents didn't even know how sick they were.

By Doug Levy
USA TODAY

President Andrew Jackson writhed in pain from an old bullet lodged in his shoulder. Woodrow Wilson was incapacitated by a stroke, and Franklin Roosevelt was dying of heart failure.

The public didn't know about these presidents' health problems until years after they left office.

Would disclosure of these health conditions have changed history? Historians and political scholars are not sure.

President Clinton's decision, steadfast since he took office, not to release his medical records breaks from the practice of immediate predecessors. But history indicates many examples of presidents keeping their health confidential.

Few presidents have opted for complete disclosure of their medical records. Presidents Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, Carter, Reagan and Bush allowed their physicians to comment publicly.

During President Reagan's cancer treatment, reporters were given free rein to question his surgeon. The same was true when he was treated for bullet wounds after an assassination attempt.

At an exhibition opening Oct. 7 at



1921 photo by UPI
Suffered stroke: Woodrow Wilson had trouble concentrating.

the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, historians have assembled several examples. Among them:

► John F. Kennedy was diagnosed as early as 1947 with Addison's disease, a treatable but incurable failure of the adrenal gland, which makes hormones controlling body functions.

But he, his doctors and his family



1941 photo by Daisy Suckley, FDR Library via AP
Private picture: FDR's failing health was kept from public view. Here he's shown with Ruthie Bie, granddaughter of caretaker Christian Bie, and dog Fala.

concealed the diagnosis throughout his career. Even when asked specifically about the Addison's diagnosis during the 1960 campaign, Kennedy's physician denied it.

► Woodrow Wilson suffered a stroke in 1919 that made it difficult for him to concentrate on policy matters for more than 10 minutes at a time. There is some evidence he



Concealed illness: JFK was diagnosed as early as 1947 with Addison's disease, a treatable but incurable failure of the adrenal gland.

1962 photo

may have had several small strokes before he was first elected in 1912.

► During Franklin D. Roosevelt's fourth term, the president's failing health was kept from the public; he was pictured only behind his desk.

When a visitor was shocked by Roosevelt's poor appearance, Labor Secretary Frances Perkins told the visitor not to tell anyone: "He has a great and terrible job to do, and he's got to do it even if it kills him." Roosevelt died three months later.

► Grover Cleveland in 1893 underwent secret cancer surgery to remove a growth in his mouth. Facing a tumultuous economy, Cleveland feared that disclosure of his surgery would worry financial markets.

"In the past, presidential administrations have not been completely honest when it comes to the president's health," says Thomas Horrick, curator of the exhibit.

"Some of those presidents were not aware themselves how sick they were."

George Lundberg, one of the pathologists at President Kennedy's 1963 autopsy, says Kennedy missed an opportunity during his time in office to teach the public about health issues.

"Full disclosure by the president and competent physicians illustrating the nature of the disease and how well it was being treated would have educated the public not to be concerned," says Lundberg, now editor in chief of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

"But I would imagine that in the 1960s, political strategists would have counseled that in a close race, that might have swung enough voters to lose the election."

► Clinton's records, 1A